

Heroism ancient and modern

Kurt Lampe

What is a hero? An altruistic do-gooder, benefiting others? A person of refined moral sentiments, resolute in using whatever special powers they possess for good, even at the expense of their own well-being? In this article, Kurt Lampe compares the problems of ancient and modern heroes.

Modern ideas of heroism resonate interestingly with ancient ones, asking us what shapes our understanding of the role of the hero in literature or society. The action and imagery of particular scenes from works of drama or literature – modern and ancient – can lead us to think carefully about more general concepts (like heroism), moving between generalization and close reading in the way familiar to Classicists. One example that appeals to me is from a TV programme justly popular in my own student days, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*; you might be able to think of similar instances from your own particular areas of interest.

In the closing moments of series 5, Buffy spares a helpless human, Ben. ‘She wouldn’t take a human life,’ her associate Giles explains to Ben. ‘Because she’s a hero, you see. She’s not like us.’ Giles then extends his hand, covers Ben’s nose and mouth, and quietly suffocates him to death. Moments later Buffy sacrifices her own life to save her sister, and the show ends with a shot of her grave. The epitaph reads, ‘Beloved sister, devoted friend. She saved the world. A lot.’

This episode clearly communicates some modern western preconceptions regarding heroism. On the surface Buffy is an altruistic do-gooder: she benefits the world at the expense of her well-being, and even her life. She is a person of refined moral sentiments, who both by inclination and principle refuses to kill. She is a caring participant in human relationships, an excellent sister and friend. These are among the characteristics students often volunteer when asked about the qualities of a hero.

On the other hand, this narrative also acknowledges what heroic ideology somehow effaces (which students therefore tend to leave out). Giles’s ruthless murder of Ben is a normal part of the heroic paradigm, which often presents us with a tension between ‘fighting for good’ and ‘sociopathic violence’. While violence may be represented as an unfortunate necessity, our ‘heroes’ frequently

enjoy the opportunity for punishment, personal revenge, or simply the release of aggression. Moreover, heroes’ interpersonal relationships are generally troubled: Buffy’s relationship with her sister is only cemented at the moment it is ended by her death.

The ancient Greek literary tradition stages similar conflicts in the stories and personalities of its heroes. In fact, it is arguably more aware of heroism’s contradictions, which may be one reason that *hērōs* is not generally an evaluative term in ancient Greek. One can debate whether Batman (for instance) is really a hero, since he sometimes appears driven by a passion to avenge his murdered parents; but one cannot ask whether Achilles is really a *hērōs*, no matter how many Trojans he brutally sacrifices on the grave of Patroclus (*Il.* 23.175–7). While Hesiod describes the ‘divine race of heroes’ as ‘better and more just’ than the race of bronze (*Works and Days* 157–9), what primarily distinguishes them is that they occupy a particular stretch of mythical time – from just before the expedition of the Argonauts to just after the Trojan War. Humans of this period are stronger, faster, and closer to the gods than humans of historical time. Like the *hērōes* worshipped in Greek cult, however, they use their semi-divine power for both constructive and destructive purposes.

In fact, we might speculate that the hazardous impulse to escape human limitations, including ethical norms, is part of what defines heroism. On one level a hero like Hector is ‘a great joy for his *polis*, and all his people’, as his father says after his death (*Il.* 24.706). Moreover, he is everything to his baby son (6.432, 24.726–39) and to his wife: ‘You are my father, my revered mother, and my brother,’ says Andromache, ‘and it is you who are my strong husband’ (6.429–30). These relationships imply a network of obligations, all of which concern preserving and enhancing the prosperity, status, and very lives of those with whom he is affiliated. These obligations correspond loosely to

the ‘altruistic do-goodery’ of modern heroes. Through them the hero is integrated into society.

Another sphere of the hero’s ethical life concerns ‘honour’ and ‘glory’. These are rewards for the suffering and danger heroes undergo on the community’s behalf. As Sarpedon says to Glaucus in a well-known passage, ‘We two have been especially honoured in Lycia in position, meat, and full wine cups . . . and everyone looks at us like gods’ (*Il.* 12.310–12). These honours, he explains, are compensation for their audacity and efficacy in battle. Social memory of courage and endurance is also a sort of redemption for heroes’ early deaths. Thus at the moment of his doom Hector says to himself, ‘Let me not die weakly or without renown, but having done something big that future generations will hear about’ (22.304–5). In some sense the remembrance of his ‘big deed’ will redeem his premature annihilation.

Modern heroes, including Buffy, are typically divided from their honour and glory by the secrecy of their alternative identities, and the necessary (and sometimes painful or costly) need to protect this by deceiving those around them. The deep cultural logic behind this barrier between the hero and his or her recognition may be illuminated by the problems of the ancient honour-and-glory system. Rather than integrating heroes in human relationships, the hunger for renown may instead tempt them to turn away from society.

Here it is important to recognize that a tragic worldview is the essential backdrop for ancient heroic ethics. ‘For every good thing,’ sings Pindar, the great lyric poet of human achievement, ‘the immortals bestow on men two sufferings’ (*Pythian Odes* 3.81–2; cf. *Il.* 24.527–33). Because the world’s divine masters seem unintelligible and often cruel, its human denizens blind and fragile, it is tempting to give up on the satisfactions of normal life. At this point killing and suffering are no longer unfortunate necessities, which heroes reluctantly accept in return for compensatory honour. Rather, heroes seek out opportunities for conflict, relishing the violent competition for honour and the pursuit of posthumous renown. The flash of honour or glory may not make life good, but at least it makes life beautiful. As he contemplates suicide, Sophocles’

tragic hero Ajax asks:

What delight is there in living day after day, moving us a little closer or further from death?... If a man is noble, he should either live beautifully or be beautifully dead. You have heard all that I have to say' (Ajax 475–80).

Thus dissatisfaction with normal life can lead heroes to invest in an alternative identity and an alternate world. Modern heroes begin to find meaning and pleasure in fighting criminals or monsters, assuming new names and appearances. These activities exist, often at night, beyond the laws and institutions which regulate other people's lives. The break is less emphatic for ancient heroes, for whom there is no close analogy to the underworld of vampires and arch-villains. Nevertheless, in many ways the battlefield and its pleasures represent an alternative to civilization. In fact, almost the entirety of the *Iliad*, which takes place during the tenth year of a titanic war, occurs in this heroic space. The beautiful flash of glory is not the only way for heroes to escape human limitations. If mythical thought often represents humanity as existing 'between the beasts and the gods, in battle heroes occasionally both aspire toward divinity and sink toward animalism. Like Achilles and Sarpedon, a few of the heroes actually are the descendants of gods. Even those born from mortals are somehow more godlike than 'humans today', which is why Hesiod calls them 'the divine race, who are called demigods' (*Works and Days* 159). While Greek poets and philosophers attempt in various ways to articulate what is attractive about godlikeness, their depictions transcend their theories. Here is Christopher Logue's inspired version of a key moment in *Iliad* 16:

*Patroclus fought like dreaming:
His head thrown back, his mouth – wide as a shrieking
mask –
Sucked at the air to nourish his infuriated mind
And seemed to draw the Trojans onto him,
To lock them around his waist, red water, washed against
his chest,
To lay their tired necks against his sword like birds.
– Is it a god? Divine? Needing no tenderness? –
Yet instantly they touch, he butts them, cuts them back:
– Kill them!
My sweet Patroclus,
– Kill them!
As many as you can,
For
Coming behind you through the dust you felt
– What was it? – felt Creation part, and then*

APOLLO!

*Who had been patient with you
Struck.*

*His hand came from the east,
And in his wrist lay all eternity;
And every atom of his mythic weight
Was poised between his fist and bent left leg.
(War Music: An Account of Books 1–4 and 16–19 of
Homer's Iliad, 161–4)*

Here beastliness and godliness intermingle. With his 'head thrown back, his mouth – wide as a shrieking mask – suck[ing] at the air to nourish his infuriated mind,' Patroclus surrenders himself to his own physical rage and vigour. Homer often compares heroes in this condition to enraged lions. But this is also a moment of superhuman ecstasy. 'Patroclus fought like dreaming': he seems to float across the battlefield like a greater being, magnetically and effortlessly drawing his opponents to his sword like 'red water.' There are many moments in Homer where heroes attain this ecstatic 'flow' of bodily and emotional power, both when fighting and when speaking.

However, heroes are not gods. 'Is it a god?' Logue asks. 'Divine? Needing no tenderness?' Only moments later Apollo,

whose godhead eclipses the pathetic aspirations of Patroclus, reminds the mortal of his place. In his death Patroclus entangles his friend Achilles, his enemy Hector, and thus everyone on both sides of the war. Of course, these heroes collude in the general ruination: Achilles' superhuman anger is the proximate cause of the *Iliad*, and the source of 'innumerable sufferings' for his allies (*Il.* 1.3); Hector's intoxication by glory leads to his death, his baby son's murder, his wife's enslavement, and his city's destruction. Thus escape from normality is purchased at the cost of social integration, or even at the cost of society itself.

In this short essay I have focused on only a single strand in the heroic tradition. Several other strands exist, such as that emblemized by Homer's Odysseus. Moreover, I have glided over the fascinating subtleties of each hero's individual story. Nevertheless, I hope that these ideas form a useful starting point for thinking about both ancient Greek literature and modern heroic fiction.

Kurt Lampe discovered both Buffy and the Classics at university in California. He currently lectures at the University of Bristol.